



North Dakota Department of Health

GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

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This guest opinion is by State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.

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State Health Department Enforces North Dakota's Country-of-Origin Labeling Law By State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D., M.P.H.T.M.

I appreciate this opportunity to clarify the North Dakota Department of Health's role in enforcing the state's country-of-origin meat labeling law. In fact, the Department of Health has been enforcing the country-of-origin labeling law since it was passed by the 1999 North Dakota legislature.

In 1999, the Department of Health notified the North Dakota Grocer's, Retailer's and Meat Locker's associations of the law and what steps were needed for compliance. In addition, the Department of Health and several local health units began monitoring compliance during routine inspections of retail facilities that sell fresh meats. In June 2002, at Gov. Hoeven's direction, the department sent reminder letters to the associations and the local public health units and began including information about compliance in all retail inspection reports. For those facilities not in compliance, a date is set for corrective actions and a follow-up inspection scheduled to ensure compliance.

According to the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service in a January 2000 report to Congress, all meat and meat products imported into the United States must be marked with a country-of-origin label; however, once that meat or meat product is removed from its container or packaging and cut up or processed in any way, country-of-origin labeling is no longer required by the federal government. Although fresh meat can be traced to a particular distributor or processing plant, that packer/processor also may handle imported meats at the same facility.

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North Dakota law requires retailers to indicate by sign, placard or label the country of origin of the fresh meat they sell. Currently, if the meat was bought from a processing/packing plant in this country, it is labeled as a product of the United States; if the meat was processed outside the United States, it must be labeled as such.

I am hopeful that the USDA will finalize federal regulations dealing with the labeling of imported meats at processing plants. In the meantime, the North Dakota Department of Health, in conjunction with the North Dakota Department of Agriculture and local health units, will continue to enforce North Dakota's country of origin labeling law.

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